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Spy Dealing, Defection, Disinforming

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At the annual convention of the Assn. of Former Intelligence Officers in Washington recently, delegates asked many questions: How serious were the recent defections *to* the Soviet Union? And how important are the very recent defections *from* Moscow? Is it possible that in the merry-go-round game of international espionage, the West had snagged three brass rings? Or was one ring a clinker?

Conversation was animated as several hundred Old Boys and Girls of the U.S. network of former intelligence people exchanged information and opinions about espionage developments. There was much to discuss.

What was the meaning of the Edward L. Howard case in New Mexico, where a former CIA officer, dismissed by the agency, slipped away from FBI agents ready to apprehend him? Edwards left his wife a note telling her to sell their house, move in with their in-laws and build a new life. After damage assessment, how serious would the Howard case turn out to be?

Happy-hour conversations were even more titillating when former Soviet operations specialists diagnosed the state of health at the KGB. Only weeks before, the Soviet intelligence agency appeared in excellent shape, when there was a spate of defections from West to East, the most damaging being Hans Joachim Tiedge, West Germany's counterintelligence chief. Before that, the first FBI special agent ever was indicted in California for collaborating with the KGB. And there was the sad revelation that a *family* of Americans had spied for the Soviets.

The Walker family spy case has confounded even intelligence veterans. Delegates at the reunion, though aware that espionage operations often require dealing with grubby people, found it difficult to comprehend how a father, his brother and his son would betray their country in order to enjoy life in the fast lane, and to continue spying for so many years to pay for the ride. Finally, 16 years after Barbara Crawley Walker learned her husband was a spy, Mrs. Walker, prodded by her daughter, alerted the FBI.

But while proliferating evidence indicates that U.S. intelligence has been battered in recent months, newer revelations demonstrate the Soviet intelligence body has suffered more serious trauma.

Three recent developments have shaken the KGB. Sergei Bokan, a senior military officer in Athens, defected to the West in May. In early September, Oleg Gordievsky, KGB station chief in London, surfaced after years as a double agent. In late September, it was revealed that earlier in the year "the fifth man" in the KGB hierarchy, Vitaly Yurchenko, had slipped away from a KGB tour group in Rome, and is being debriefed by the CIA near Washington.

Yurchenko had been in Washington before, as a first secretary at the Soviet Embassy—a diplomatic cover rank tagging him as the deputy chief, if not chief, of the KGB's most important station. He later served as deputy chief of the KGB directorate that conducts all operations against the United States and Canada.

Knowledgeable delegates whispered that Yurchenko had worked for years as a CIA mole burrowed deep in the KGB—an assertion later confirmed by the State Department. They were confident that Yurchenko would explain lingering espionage mysteries. (He revealed that a decade before, in Vienna, Soviet defector Nicholas G. Shadrin, acting as a CIA-FBI double agent, had been the victim of espionage manslaughter: KGB agents, intending to kidnap Shadrin, killed him with an overdose of chloroform.) Most important, former counterintelligence delegates insisted that Yurchenko could identify any moles in CIA. (Whether he knew of any is not yet clear; but he did identify Howard as a CIA man who, after flunking polygraph tests, tried to hawk purloined secrets to the KGB.)

What do the defections signal? Is there some sort of double-agent skulduggery afoot? It's too early to be sure. Veteran operatives are guided by an intelligence maxim: Never assume—know. So, in discussing the significance of the three defections, they temporized. Meanwhile, hunches ran wild.

Intelligence officers depend on professional intuition—an ability to sense that a critical development has occurred before all the facts are in and it can be proved.

"That's what I look for," said one convention regular. "That awareness which gives you a funny feeling at the back of your neck—the suspicion which suddenly becomes a conviction that something important is in motion."

These people have experience; some occasionally return to their agencies for temporary duty. They have friends still working in intelligence. So they know more about the recent espionage developments than the ordinary citizen.

But not much more.

In intelligence agencies the "need to know" rule means that most officers never learn the identities of agents-in-place, nor have access to sufficient data to be sure about motivation. Despite their insider's knowledge, intelligence people often fail to reach a consensus about defectors. For more than two decades, CIA officers have been bitterly disputing the bona fides of Anatoli Golitsin, a major defector—or a major disinformation agent. That dispute continued at the Washington conclave.

Thus, even intelligence professionals are tempted to speculate, and, sometimes, to concoct defector conspiracy theories. In some areas experience is useful. Intelligence veterans, for instance, recognize as nonsense the contention that defectors are surfaced on the eve of important events, such as a summit conference. Not a chance. Penetrations of the Soviet intelligence apparat would never be sacrificed as a propaganda gambit. When they surface there must be another reason. In the case of Gordievsky, for instance, the reason for surfacing him now might be because Yurchenko, when he defected, warned that Gordievsky's double-agent role had been discovered.

A sound argument can be made to be wary of the recent defectors; at least one might be a disinformation agent. It's happened before. One delegate explained: "Some people believe that airline crashes occur in threes, that after two air disasters another will follow soon. I believe that whenever there are two defections that jolt the Russians you'd better be prepared for a third—the defector who is really dispatched to spread disinformation to discredit the first two."

Intelligence officers remain suspicious, skeptical, even cynical. But they do like to hear circumstantial evidence that will make their suspicions appear valid.

Some felt surer about their gut feelings after John Barron's speech at the convention's closing banquet. Barron, who knows more about Soviet intelligence than any non-official in the West, is the author of two authoritative books on the KGB.

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In his speech, Barron revealed what he has learned about the spies who have defected from the West toward Moscow in recent months, or have been arrested while working for the Soviets in the West. They are a sorry lot, Barron said, afflicted with character defects and problems, ranging from avarice to alcoholism.

Then Barron surprised many by saying he had learned "from multiple sources" that the three Soviet defectors are "fine people." They are uncomplicated, stable men. They are not, Barron insists, the kind of people who crossed over because they were drunks or embezzlers or addicts seeking quick fixes for kinky personal problems. Asked to evaluate the importance of the three defections, Barron said they were important—*extraordinarily* important.

The KGB is indeed in trouble if the three most recent defectors are a new breed, men motivated to commit the emotional suicide of betraying their own country as a form of political protest.

After the convention, two former senior Soviet operations officers, one quite recently retired, were asked what the chances were that the three recent Soviet defectors were an intelligence hat-trick, three brass rings from the international espionage merry-go-round. In responding, the experts upgraded the metal—their solid professional hunch was the chances were golden. □

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